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ABSTRACT

This paper describes efforts to identify students at risk of dropping out of school in 21 school districts in central New York. Examination of the student folders of 309 recent dropouts and interviews with principals, superintendents, and guidance counselors provided data, which were organized on student dropout data sheets, a protocol developed from standard indicators in the dropout literature. Incomplete files, inconsistent information, and errors in test score data made sophisticated statistical analysis inappropriate. As an alternative, "profiles" were developed to provide a crude system for dropout classification. These profiles were: (1) the "slow learner"--the traditional dropout, most likely to be identified as "high risk"; (2) the student whose general achievement diminishes each year, usually not identified until secondary school; (3) the student with an uneven pattern of performance and diminishing achievement in particular areas; and (4) the student strongly affected by an event or situation, such as pregnancy or family problems. At least 20% of the student folders fit each of these four profiles. The profiles have good potential as useful tools for school personnel concerned with early identification of "at risk" students. This paper contains an outline of student characteristics and suggested remediation for each dropout type, and a sample student dropout data sheet. (SV)

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EARLY IDENTIFICATION OF POTENTIAL DROPOUTS:

TOWARDS A DEFINITION

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EARLY IDENTIFICATION OF POTENTIAL DROPOUTS: TOWARDS A DEFINITION

Two years ago we were asked to work with twenty one school districts in the central New York area to assist them in identifying students at-risk of dropping out of school and then provide recommendations for their retention. The schools belonged to two different regional Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) areas in New York State, the Madison-Oneida BOCES and Tompkins-Seneca-Tioga BOCES.

While we both had experience with dropout prevention efforts dating back to the federally funded programs of the mid-1970s, we still took the path that most college professors would follow and started out by reading the recent research on school dropouts. Not surprisingly, we found that the indicators for dropping out in the '80s were no different than they were in the '70s: low SES, high absenteeism, truancy and tardiness, poor grades, lack of identification with the school in terms of involvement with extracurricular participation, adjustment difficulties, poor self concept, an orientation revolving around the present as versus the future, fragmented family, record of disciplinary problems, etc.

We also found that writers and researchers tended to give a lot of attention to statistics, such as the fact that 1,000,000 students drop out annually, that the current population shift in America sees a significant decrease in the 18-24 age group by 1995 (leaving no one to handle the jobs in America's greatest enterprises -- the fast food restaurants and

shopping malls!), that the 13,000 dropouts from the Chicago schools will cost taxpayers $60,000,000 per year in welfare costs and lost revenue. In addition, the dropout rate in Boston is now higher than the graduation rate and the total cost to U.S. taxpayers for this group will be in the neighborhood of $75 billion dollars per year. There are of course the complementary statistics related to the American family: 60% of today's children will live in a one parent home before they reach adulthood, one in four is presently living in this situation today, and between 1960 and 1980 the divorce rate tripled in this country and 50% of marriages end in divorce.

Of further concern is the fact that since the early to mid-1980s, with adoption of the school reform movement, 39 of the states in the U.S. have adopted more rigorous graduation requirements. While the data on the effect of this adoption is just beginning to become available, the hypothesis of many is less than optimistic. According to the National Commission on Education: "As emphasis on individual academic achievement rises, low achievers are likely to throw in the towel."

Our initial research into practices showed that efforts were being made at individual schools with some success. However, these successes tended not to be adopted on regional or statewide levels. This led us to two conclusions: (1) the ability to reduce dropout rates in some districts was due to district-specific remedies, and/or (2) the efforts were a result of the gatekeeping efforts of either one, or a small

handful, of individuals who got personally involved in the problem. While it was not our purpose to research the former, it is worth noting that the literature on "change" efforts is replete with evidence that any true change does in fact have at least one person who is identified as the driving force behind it. This appeared to be true of the programs we visited and studied. The problem with this phenomena is that such persons become noted for their success and often receive attractive offers which cause them to move on. Their departure, in turn, may be associated with the eventual demise of the program unless careful efforts have been made to see that the program is institutionalized.

In analyzing our data in relation to our charge, how to identify and then treat students at-risk, we determined that two steps should occur. First, we decided to look specifically at students who had recently dropped out of the schools which had hired us. Second, based on the students who dropped out, we developed specific suggestions which we believed could in fact reduce the dropout phenomena in the schools with which we had worked. The purpose of this article is to describe the former: who drops out.

WHO DROPS OUT?

Based on our charge, we decided to review the student folders of 309 students who had dropped out of the schools which we studied. In addition, we interviewed principals, superintendents and guidance counselors. While we also intended to interview the dropouts and their parents, we found

it virtually impossible to locate enough of them to draw any useful conclusions.

In order to conduct the investigation, we developed the following protocol based on the standard types of indicators noted in the dropout literature.

STUDENT DROPOUT DATA SHEET

NAME_____ SCHOOL_____

ADDRESS_____ PHONE_____

GRADE WHEN DROPPED___ DATE ENTERED_____DATE DROPPED_____

DOB_____ GENDER_____ MARITAL STATUS: M S D

NATIONAL ORIGIN: BLACK CAUCASIAN HISPANIC NATIVE AMER OTHER:

PARENT'S MARITAL STATUS:_____

PARENT'S EDUCATION - FATHER:_____ MOTHER:_____

PARENT'S WORK STATUS - FATHER:_____ MOTHER:_____

TRANSFER STATUS:

ATTENDANCE: (days absent)

K:	_____	7:	_____
1:	_____	8:	_____
2:	_____	9:	_____
3:	_____	10:	_____
4:	_____	11:	_____
5:	_____	12:	_____
6:	_____	Repeats: ____:	_____

DISCIPLINE REFERRALS (include any note on substance abuse):

REASON FOR DROPPING OUT:

STUDENT -

PARENT -

SCHOOL -

HANDICAPPING CONDITION? (PROVIDE COH CLASSIFICATION)

READINESS LEVELS ON ENTRANCE:

Student_____

APTITUDE (in %s) TEST	VERBAL	QUANT	FULL SCALE
1:	_____	_____	_____
3:	_____	_____	_____
6:	_____	_____	_____
7:	_____	_____	_____
10:	_____	_____	_____

ACHIEVEMENT (in %s)	LANG or ENG	S.S.	MATH	SCI
1:	____	____	____	____
3:	____	____	____	____
6:	____	____	____	____
7:	____	____	____	____
10:	____	____	____	____

PRELIMINARY COMPETENCY TEST SCORES:

READING _____ WRITING _____ MATH _____

SIBLINGS (place DOB next to the appropriate category for each)

MALE:

FEMALE:

RECEIVING FREE OR REDUCED LUNCH? (if so, note which):

In addition to the protocol, other pertinent information was noted which could be gleaned through teacher comments and side notes in permanent record files, as well as information picked up in conversation. Access to records makes school personnel extremely careful about what they place in a student file, consequently, conversations with personnel often revealed information about home situations, alleged drug use, pregnancies, etc. which were not included in individual records.

Profiles

The data in the cumulative records presented a variety of analytical problems. At first we planned to keypunch massive amounts of data into the computer, search for logical relationships using multiple regression and test our final hypotheses with analysis of variance. It quickly became clear to us that this would not be possible. First, many of the folders were incomplete. While one folder might have several pieces of data supporting a particular variable, other folders had none. This made any sort of sophisticated statistical comparison inappropriate.

Files also contained inconsistent information. For example, a particular file might have several pieces of data pertinent to determining the student's aptitude. Unfortunately, the data did not agree. Some of the data begged for one interpretation while other data in the same folder undermined that same interpretation. Clearly one value could not accommodate conflicting interpretations.

Files contained errors. For example, percentiles was the

favored way of entering test score data. Often, when we looked at original scores sheets, we found that percentage scores, rather than percentiles, had actually been entered. This made us uncomfortable about accepting percentile scores when the original sheets were not in the folder. It also made us uncomfortable about the accuracy of other data entered in the record.

Finally, since we were dealing with files from many different school districts, there were many different inconsistencies. Different tests were administered at different times under different circumstances, to different (or sometime the same) students, and recorded in different manners. In the light of all of these differences, making statistical comparisons seemed a risky business.

Thus, we found ourselves in the position of having a rich source of data with no defensible means of analysis. As a result, we decided to formulate some hypotheses and then see if and how the data fit those hypotheses. The conclusions presented here are a result of that analysis. Clearly, further work needs to be done to clarify important variables and then each of our conclusions needs to be validated under more carefully controlled circumstances. What we offer here are some tentative interpretations.

Our first hypothesis was that dropping out of school for many students is related in large part to "success." Academic success or success in school is usually measured in terms of achievement. Almost every student who dropped out of school

had some record of failure. However, while some records revealed consistent failure, some indicated almost equal amounts of success and failure and still others indicated predominantly success with only a few failures. Similarly, some records indicated a high level of failure from the beginning of school, while others showed early school success which gradually diminished to failure and still other showed consistent success until just prior to dropping out of school. These data suggested to us that failure in school and probably the student's perceptions about failure are related to that student eventually dropping out.

The student's success is related to his aptitude for learning in school. Traditionally, dropouts have been portrayed as low achievers with limited potential. While the data we studied indicated that failure to achieve was a good predictor of who would drop out and who would not, aptitude was a poor predictor. That is, the sample of dropouts exhibited a range of aptitude very similar to the range of aptitude for the general population of the school. Thus we concluded that most students who drop out are underachievers rather than low achievers.

This relationship between aptitude and achievement provided us our first basis for differentiating among the dropouts. We needed a system that differentiated among students whose achievement was low and aptitude was low and students whose achievement was low, but aptitude was substantially higher. We also needed a system which

differentiated among those students whose achievement was low from the time they entered school and those who were successful at first and later failed and even for those students who had always been successful in school, but had eventually dropped out. What emerged from this effort was "the profiles." The profiles are a relatively crude classification system which differentiates among students dropping out of school.

The first profile might be termed the "slow learner." These students exhibit most of the traits associated with the traditional dropout. They begin school at low levels of readiness. From the beginning they appear to have difficulty learning basic skills and have a high incidence of retention in the primary grades. Where available, these students are often assigned to transitional classrooms which gives them extra time to progress through the primary grades. For most of these students the retention or assignment to special classes, appears to have little impact on their achievement. Throughout school they continue to achieve at low levels until they finally choose to dropout. Of all the profiles, these students are the ones most likely to be identified by the schools as "high risk." They are also the most likely to be enrolled in remedial and other programs offered by the school to reduce low achievement and the incidence of dropping out.

Profile II students differ from Profile I students in that they begin school with some degree of success. They are not likely to be retained in the primary grades or to be selected for participation in special "transitional"

classrooms. Their achievement usually begins to diminish during the intermediate grades and continues until they leave school. Under present circumstances these students seldom are identified as "high risk" until secondary school. By this time Profile II students appear indistinguishable from Profile I students.

Profile III students also experience diminishing achievement. However, they differ from Profile II students in several important ways. First, the achievement of Profile III students tends to start at a higher level. It may be that as a group Profile III students may have more aptitude than Profile II students. The achievement of these students diminishes as it does for Profile II students, but achievement diminishes more slowly and to a lesser degree. Finally, achievement declines and failures of Profile III students tends to be confined to particular areas or subject matter areas. That is, unlike Profile II students whose achievement tends to diminish generally, the Profile III student may experience diminishing achievement in one skill or subject area, such as math or science, but not in others, such as reading or social studies. As a result, a major identifying characteristic of Profile III students is an uneven pattern of achievement and performance. They may exhibit areas of conspicuous strength and areas of conspicuous weakness. Not surprisingly, Profile III students are much less likely to be identified "at risk" than Profile I or II students.

Once we had identified these three profiles, it was clear

that a significant number of students who dropped out did not comfortably fit any of our profiles. Even when we eliminated pregnant females and suspected heavy alcohol and drug users, we had a significant number of students remaining who fit none of the profiles. In fact there were a sufficient number so that attaching a label like "other" simply was not at all satisfying.

At this point we noticed two patterns in the data. Many of these students had experienced no significant achievement declines until less than a year prior to dropping out. When achievement declines started earlier, it was common for counselor or other school personnel to refer to an event. For example, in one case the counselor said "that was when she ran away with her boyfriend and lived in Florida for a few weeks. In another case, "that was about the time her father died. And in still another case, that was when he took a job driving truck.

These data caused us to conclude that another profile exists that has little or nothing to do with school achievement or success. Profile IV students are those who appear to be strongly influenced by a particular event or situation. In some cases, such as pregnancy, the influence may be direct in that this circumstance alone may cause the student to drop out of school. In other cases, such as drug use or family problems, the influence is less direct. In fact, the student's achievement may diminish similar to Profile III students. However, the diminished achievement tends to be much more

dramatic and all subjects and skills are involved. Rather than the gradual uneven performance that we see with Profile III, Profile IV achievement tends to drop quickly and in all subjects.

Following is an outline of each of the Profiles with some identifying characteristics and tentative suggestions for remediation.

PROFILE I

CHARACTERISTICS

Tend to be male
May be developmentally immature
Small listening and speaking vocabularies
Unable to sit and concentrate for long periods
Low readiness
Low test scores
Inexperience with concepts and ideas
Low achievement motivation
Often retained in early grades
Low academic achievement continues through school
Low academic success leading to later antisocial behaviors

REMEDIATION

Pre-kindergarten programs
Early identification leading to inclusion in chapter programs
Intensive remediation, summer and in-year
Identifying unique aptitudes and interests
Vocational opportunities
Early counseling support
Family intervention through outside services

OBSERVATIONS

Of the four profiles we identified, today's schools are best prepared and organized to meet the needs of PROFILE I students. These are the stereotyped low achievers, seen by many educators as those who will either "squeak by" by being enrolled in low track programs (along with additional remedial assistance) or will eventually depart from the school house entirely.

PROFILE I

CHARACTERISTICS

Manifest contradictory performance, aptitude, development
Scores well on certain areas of tests, not well on others
May score low on vocabulary tests, yet display good knowledge in particular areas
Performance may follow - low generally but well in certain subjects, often vocational
Antisocial behaviors may increase with years
Have higher aptitude than performance indicates

REMEDIATION

Use of individual I.Q. tests
Early identification of aptitude
Build on aptitude
Vocational opportunities
Early counseling support
Mastery learning

OBSERVATIONS

Profile II students will "turn off" to school if not provided instruction which is of interest to them. This may cause them to regress and appear to be Profile I types. Use of student data to prevent mislabeling is a must.

PROFILE III

CHARACTERISTICS

Manifest contradictory performance, aptitude, development
Begin school with what appears to be good readiness
Achievement at primary level is at/above average, at some point starts a slow, steady decline
Disparity in achievement is manifested until the point at which the student drops out or may achieve at minimum level to "get by"
Has potential, may have good aptitude
Often goes unnoticed
Little parent support
Increases in anti-social behavior

REMEDIATION

Use of student data to determine aptitude vs. achievement
Consistent monitoring
School-parent communication
Parent education

OBSERVATIONS

Profile III students may do what they have to in order to "get by." They are able to do so because of good ability. Attention may eventually wander while they look for other areas in which to become involved. Often come from homes in which education is not a highly valued goal. Develop "I don't care" attitude.

PROFILE IV

CHARACTERISTICS

Good performance and aptitude
Abrupt change in behavior and performance
May become sudden discipline problem (active or passive)
First signal that a problems exists may be dropping out
Often associated with home or personal problems

REMEDIATION

Strong counseling program with well trained personnel (might utilize outside agency services)
Teachers trained in identification
School-parent communication
Community agency interventions

OBSERVATIONS

Profile IV students often experience a problem such as death in the family, divorce, pregnancy and moving. Often the most difficult profile with which to deal, counseling services which can be delivered quickly are a necessity.

Summary

Based on our initial review of folders, we found that at least 20% of the 309 folders we reviewed fell into each of the four profiles we have described. Some students fit more than one profile, others did not quite fit any. As a result, we believe the profiles to have a great deal of potential for use by pupil personnel staff. We would also note that this is the first time, at least in our review of dropout literature, that it has been suggested that the means for identifying potential

dropouts should vary. In addition, we also acknowledge the need for further refinement of what we have proposed.

The profiles provided can be useful tools to school personnel concerned with the early identification of potential dropouts. We acknowledge that we have not assigned "weightings" to the factors listed. And while we cannot jump to the conclusion that a student who exhibits a predetermined number of characteristics is likely to leave school, we would encourage school personnel to look at their own recent dropouts in relation to the profiles we have provided to see whether it might in fact be possible to accurately prognosticate.

We also recommend to school personnel we work with that the profiles be used in order to tip off teachers and counselors to a student who might be at risk. If students do exhibit a number of these factors, a conscious effort should be made by school personnel to carefully monitor the progress of those young people. These students should be placed on the pupil personnel committee's agenda and discussed regularly. If after three to four months the student is making good progress, their name might be taken off the agenda. However, one member of the staff should be assigned responsibility to continue monitoring the student and be ready to bring his or her name forth, if appropriate.

Perhaps one of our most important findings deals with the observation that dropping out is the problem of all people in the schoolhouse. Without question, elementary teachers are generally very concerned about the well being of the children

in their school district. However, a belief has prevailed historically that dropping out occurs at the high school, therefore, it is not the elementary teacher's problem. We would argue this point vehemently. Dropping out, as noted in our profiles, starts for some children even before they begin school. The characteristics are evident and elementary teachers, administrators and guidance personnel should, and can, use accurate data to note that a particular child is indeed "at-risk." Staff members should be sensitive to the fact that those students exhibiting the factors we have presented may ultimately drop out. They should also be cognizant that the provision of early intervention through academic support and social/emotional assistance enhances the chances of keeping those children in school. And that, after all, is what it's all about.